**On the Lap of Spring**

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# On the Lap of Spring

by LunaStories

Summary

Spring is in the air, and Will finds himself seeking Hannibal's help more often than not. Eventually, those meetings become something less formal, and Will learns to see Hannibal as more than just his therapist. Meanwhile, the Ripper strikes again but something about this new display seems familiar and on top of his recent bout of hallucinations, Will isn't quite sure what to believe.

A story of blood and trust, covered by the sweet scent of Spring.

Notes

Hello and welcome to the first of four season themed pieces I'll be creating in collaboration with Lin! This is a series that I'm very excited to work on and I'm so pleased to post the first of it for you guys to read. The other ones will come in due time, but until then, this fic can be read as a standalone.

I would like to thank Lin for being so kind and generous as to agree to collab with me. When I saw her first art piece for her Seasons series I kind of died inside and had to ask if she'd be open to me writing a fic for each of her themed pieces. Thankfully, she said yes! And now here we are~

As mentioned before, this is the first of 4 pieces. In the order of: Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter and will have one continuous storyline.

Without further ado, please do enjoy the story! The art pieces will be posted within the fic (with permission from Lin) and also linked at the end.

See the end of the work for more notes

There was a steady dripping sound, a quiet metronome of stillness that felt stifling in its false sense of peace. Will sat, legs crossed and head tilted towards the wide windows in Hannibal's office as he tapped his fingers to the beat of the falling rain.

It was drizzling, but it was sunny outside, a contrast that shouldn't feel as eerie as it was. Cold rain in the warm light of spring. Will could already feel his headache getting worse.

"What does loneliness mean to you?"

Will turned his head towards the voice, his jaw clenched tight in an instinctive motion before he forced himself to relax. He dragged his eyes down Hannibal's body, that familiar three piece suit and insufferably stoic expression growing more familiar by the day. His therapist, or 'friend', as Hannibal liked to insist, was sitting across from him with his hands folded neatly in his lap.

Will blinked, realizing he'd stared for a bit too long, and turned back to the windows. "The feeling of loneliness is an evolutionary construct, one ingrained in us so that we are forced to socialize and have a higher chance of survival. We give pieces of ourselves to the people we know, and in turn we receive parts of them. We build ourselves up with the broken pieces of others. It's what makes us human."

The soft shift of fabric caught his attention, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Hannibal lean forward, an entranced look on his face that he would usually hide from Will. Hannibal was always close, too close most days. Always leaning towards Will, always creeping closer. It had unnerved him at first, how efficient Hannibal was at sneaking past his barriers, but he's since resigned himself to this casual invasion of personal space and privacy.

Hannibal was a deeply curious man, and Will had an inkling that he wasn't the type to keep away from things that fascinated him. If Will was to be honest with himself, he didn't mind it. He'd been alone for so long, Hannibal's persistent interest was almost flattering. If only he could figure out whether or not Hannibal's interest was in his empathy, or Will himself.

Maybe it didn't matter. His empathy was just as much a part of him as every other facet of his personality.

"Is that why you isolate yourself, Will? Do you feel too human most days, dripping with emotions and drowning in fevered dreams?"

Will inhaled deeply and exhaled with a slight shudder as his heart pounded in his chest. He felt exposed, his every fear and weakness excavated by Hannibal's words. It was his defensiveness, and his insecurities that forced biting words out of his mouth. "Is that why you put so much weight in socializing, Doctor Lecter?" He retorted with a sneer, fingers tapping just a tad bit faster on the arm of the sofa chair. "Perhaps you should examine what exactly it is you're trying to find, and whether those parties of yours are enough to fill that void in you."

Hannibal ignored his prickly words, completely bypassing his rudeness. Will had noticed that was a common theme in their interactions, and he still didn't understand why he was allowed so much leeway when any other person would have caused a moue of displeasure to steal across Hannibal's face. "Eldon Stammets was trying to find a connection. He was a lonely man, and he saw himself reflected in you."

Will scoffed, rubbing a shaking hand against his lips, his coarse stubble dragging across his skin. "You forget, Doctor, that I reflect everyone. My empathy doesn't allow me to pick and choose."

"I'm curious if what he saw was a product of the piece of him you picked up, or if it was something already inside of you. A part of you laid dormant for years, and only now with the proper conditions and encouragement, has chosen to bloom."

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Will muttered, feeling petulant as he stood up. Hannibal followed suit, his steps echoing Will's as he grabbed Will's jacket from the coat hanger and handed it to him. "You really suck at this therapy thing."

"Do I?" Hannibal raised a brow, though he looked more amused than offended. "I'd like to think we've made some progress today."

"Most therapists aren't supposed to anger their patients."

"I argue that my methods are effective, but how you react to them can be hard to predict."

Will eyed Hannibal, taking in his small smile, and the relaxed way he held himself. Hannibal reminded him of a large predator most days, a languid jungle cat that pounced when you least expected it with coiled muscles and terrifying accuracy. He shook his head to dislodge the thought. Hannibal was a fucking therapist, the most dangerous thing he could ever do was scribble in his therapist books. "I imagine that's rare for you."

"What is?"

"Finding someone unpredictable."

Hannibal stared at Will, something dark in his gaze, a steady regard like a predator greeting another. "Most people are unpredictable. It's only some whose unpredictability leads to interesting outcomes," Hannibal smiled, pressing a hand gently to Will's side and guiding him out the door. "Though you are correct in assuming that for me, people are easy to read."

Will let out a considering hum. In this way, they were similar. Hannibal could read people, but Will felt people's emotions on every level. Maybe together, they were something outside of humanity, so accustomed to observing that they no longer belonged with the masses they observed.

That was a thought for another time. Will could already feel the weight of the day pressing heavy on him, a darkness that threatened to drag him under. He knew it would manifest in his dreams tonight, the desperation in Stammets eyes as he'd stared up at Will, and the pain in his throat as he'd fired his gun.

“Will?”

He turned, already out the door, his jacket slung across his forearm as he stared up at Hannibal. Hannibal stood, almost glowing in the light of the setting sun. The bushes that surrounded his office were in full bloom, gentle pink furls laid bare as a few butterflies flitted about. Bees followed suit, buzzing languidly in the air and flying past Hannibal, too small to recognize the danger a human could pose. Or rather, the danger that Hannibal kept hidden within him.

“How did it feel?”

Will’s fingers were steady when he took off his glasses, staring through them at the distorted image of the wet ground. He tongue darted out to lick his dry lips, and for the first time that day, he felt settled when he answered.

“It was…powerful.”

He could almost taste the way Stammets’ life had fled his body, permeating the air with the last vestiges of his life, eyes blank as Will’s heart thudded in his ears.

“Was it lonely?”

“No, I felt-“ Will closed his eyes, his mind filled to the brim with the imagined sensation of a Ravenstag at his back, nudging his gun forward, urging him to shoot. To take his pound in blood and to sate his thirst. When he looked up he met Hannibal’s eyes, unimpeded by the barrier of his glasses for the first time, and the hunger he saw there made him shudder.

“I felt whole.”

xxxxxx

“Abigail is awake.”

Will looked up from where he was gathering his lecture notes, distracted by the ever looming shadow of the Ravenstag at the corner of his eye. He blinked, and for a moment, Alana was impaled on a deer head. Another blink, and she was staring at him in concern.

“Will?”

“Oh, yes,” Will responded, voice low as he shoved his papers in his bag and turned towards her expectantly. “Are we going to go see her?”

“No, actually,” Alana’s words were slow and measured, a tactic she often used for unruly patients or those she didn’t wish to offend. Will knew he wasn’t going to like what she said next, and his mouth was already pulling into a frown when she confirmed his hunch with her next words. “I’m here to stop you from seeing her.”

“You can’t *stop* me from anything, Alana.”

Alana huffed out a breath, her hands going to her hip before changing her mind and clasping both in front of her instead. “That came out wrong. I didn’t mean to make it sound like a demand-“

“That’s exactly what it is, isn’t it?” Will interrupted with a mumble. His harsh tone softened when he saw the look Alana shot him. “Sorry, it’s just- I’ve been having these headaches. Nightmares too.”

She frowned then, ever pretty even with her face scrunched up in concern. “Have you gone to a doctor yet?”

“And tell them what?” Will scoffed, running a hand through his messy curls. “That I’m stressed because I’m letting the serial killers I profile dig their claws into me? The psychiatrists would have a field day. No, I think I’m good.”

“Still, have you spoken to Hannibal at least?” Alana rested a gentle hand on his arm, his muscles tense where he’d crossed them against his chest.

“It seems all I do these days is talk to Hannibal.”

She raised a brow. “Is he helping you? He’s really good at what he does.”

“I wouldn’t say he’s *good*…” More like frustrating and annoyingly distracting. Hannibal was good in the sense that he seemed to know how to dig out your worst fears and force you to face them. He had a sadistic side that Will doesn’t think most people notice. But after more than a few sessions with him, he was starting to get the sense that Hannibal enjoyed making him uncomfortable just to see him squirm.

“Well,” Alana rolled her eyes, a small smile on her pink lips. “As long as he’s helping you.”

Will pressed his lips together, realizing with some irritation that he’d implied Hannibal was helpful in some way. He sighed, a measured breath out his mouth as he pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “Maybe. I don’t know. I’ve never had a therapist that lasted this long.”

“It seems you’ve met your match.” Alana teased, and Will smiled, a slight quirk to his lips.

“Maybe I have, but that’s not what you came here to say.”

“No,” Alana bit at her bottom lip, her hands folding against her chest as she took a step away from him. “Abigail woke up, and I wanted to advise you against seeing her.”

There was a long pause as Will clenched his jaw, eyes stubbornly focused on the floor and probably glaring a hole through it. “Well how did you know I would try to visit her? I’m not exactly someone she would want to see.”

“I know you know that,” Alana said gently, always so gentle with him as if he was a fucking fragile teacup. “And I know that a part of you feels responsible for her now, but she needs time to digest what happened and to get back on her feet. Regain her independence. I don’t think it’s healthy for either of you to see each other.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been healthy,” Will could feel the Ravenstag at his back, breathing down his neck but also providing him a support to lean against, to steady himself. “And I doubt she’d want to see her father’s killer anyways.”

“You’re not a killer, Will.” Alana was firm in her conviction, and Will wished he had that same certainty for himself. “You saved her from a monster that wore the skin of her father, and I know it’ll take a while but I hope you know that it wasn’t your fault. You did what you had to do.”

Will closed his eyes. He could see the way Jacob Hobbs had stared up at him, skin clammy and pale as he’d hissed out the same word over and over again.

*See?*

And Will did see. He wasn’t a killer unless he enjoyed it, and a part of him had felt nothing but bliss as he pulled the trigger. Even through the panic and fear, he’d never felt more alive.

He shivered, a low voice and familiar words whispered against the back of his neck.

*How did it feel?*

Powerful. It always felt so powerful, and he wondered if maybe that was why Hannibal seemed so attached to him. If maybe he would see his own darkness reflected in Hannibal’s.

A gentle touch against his arm broke him out of the stupor he’d fallen into and he opened his eyes with a gasp. Alana was staring at him, her lips moving but he couldn’t hear anything. There was a buzzing in his head, a steady thumping accompanying the melody, a cacophony of cicadas and the scent of soil and human fertilizer.

The scent of rotting bodies and connection.

“-ill, are you okay?”

“Yes I’m- yes,” Will stuttered, backing away from her until he could feel the soft feathers of the Ravenstag against his back. “I think you should go. I won’t visit Abigail.”

Alana reached for him again, and he flinched, his body sweaty and sensitive. Her fingers hovered in the air for a moment before she dropped her hand. “…Okay, but I think you should go see a doctor.”

Will could only nod, giving a pointed glance at the door until she reluctantly left with a final soft parting. He clenched his eyes shut, a shaking hand rubbing at his temple as he panted. There was something fucking wrong with him, and he needed a doctor, but Hannibal probably wasn’t the kind of doctor Alana had been referring to.

Still, his body ached, his mind even more exhausted, and all he wanted to do was sit in Hannibal’s office where they could discuss things and speak without barriers. Will sighed. He would go see Hannibal, and maybe he would know what was wrong with him.

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The door opened, and dim light spilled out. Hannibal looked up, a small smile growing on his face when he noticed Will. Will stood up, eyes darting down to the suit jacket he had tucked against his arm.

“Are you closed for business?” Will joked, even as he rubbed the back of his neck with a bit of embarrassment. It was noon, so he thought Hannibal would still be in his office for the rest of the day but he shouldn’t have assumed. “Sorry, I probably should have called…”

“Nonsense Will, my door is always open for friends,” Will met Hannibal’s eyes for a brief moment, just enough to see the way they crinkled at the corners with fondness, before he looked down again. “I just finished up with my last patient for today. Is there something you would like to discuss?”

“I really shouldn’t bother you.”

“May I suggest something?”

Will tilted his head, a subtle gesture for Hannibal to continue.

“We can have a late lunch at my house,” Hannibal smiled, stepping closer and guiding Will out the door and towards his car. “It would be a pleasure to cook for you, Will. Did you drive here?”

“Uh,” Will squinted, his eyes momentarily blinded by the light outside. He was acutely aware of the press of Hannibal’s hand against the small of his back. It felt warm. He shivered, slightly regretting not bringing a thicker jacket. “I didn’t. I haven’t really been in the right state of mind to drive.”

Will knew he would have to talk to Hannibal about the hallucinations soon. They were starting to affect his daily life, and he was self-aware enough to know that it wasn’t safe for him to drive in his current condition. He’d taken a taxi and it wasn’t his favorite mode of transport but it would have to do for now.

Hannibal let out a considering hum, opening the door to his fancy car. He waited until Will slid into the seat before closing it. Will breathed in the expensive leather, feeling out of place. It wasn’t until Hannibal returned, seating himself in the driver’s side, that Will felt himself relax. The purr of the engine turning on, and the smooth way Hannibal handled his car as they drove towards Hannibal’s house, lulled Will into an almost trance-like peace.

“Would you like to talk about it?” The voice broke through the haze of his drifting thoughts, and Will knew that Hannibal was likely curious.

Will placed his chin on the palm of his hand, resting his weight on the arm he had pressed against the door. He could see the way Hannibal glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, just fast enough that Will wouldn’t have noticed it if he wasn’t looking for it. He found that Hannibal liked looking at him, whether that was a therapist thing, or perhaps a Hannibal thing, he wasn’t sure. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about it. To be watched so intently. Every piece of him held bare.

“I don’t know,” Will puffed out a harsh breath, warm against the palm of his hand. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin. I don’t want you to think I’m-“

He cut himself off, clenching his jaw as he clasped his hands in his lap with a tight grip. He stared down at them, at the veins that flowed under his skin, and wondered if Hannibal could see the madness that lurked beneath. He didn’t want Hannibal to think he was insane. He wanted the nightmares and the terrifying visions to stop, but he didn’t know how to stop them.

He blinked, and in the next moment there was another hand pressing gentle fingers against the inside of his wrist, just a quick squeeze before Hannibal’s hand retreated. Will had stopped breathing during that brief touch, too stunned by how good it felt, how comforting and right.

“Will, nothing you say would make me think less of you.”

He let out a slow breath, rubbing his thumb over the spot that seemed to burn with Hannibal’s lingering touch. “I don’t want to think differently about myself.”

“You’re afraid that by speaking your fears out loud, they will become more real.”

“Yes,” Will sighed, rubbing a finger against his eyes, irritated from lack of sleep. “I know it sounds irrational but I…there has to be a reason this is happening right? Something physical rather than psychological?”

Will looked at Hannibal, hope in his eyes. Hannibal stared straight ahead, a distant look in his eyes as he pressed his lips together. He licked them, a quick dart of his tongue that Will couldn’t help but mirror.

“That would depend on what your symptoms are. I can’t help you if you hide them, Will.”

A silence descended on the car, Hannibal expectant and Will reluctant. Hannibal took mercy on him and didn’t bring it up again, though Will knew he wasn’t off the hook completely. Once they arrived, they got out and Hannibal led Will to his door. Will looked around with interest, taking in the massive house.

“You have a nice place.”

Hannibal turned his head, just enough to glance back at Will as he smiled and turned the key. “Thank you, Will. I find that home is where you must put in the most effort to make it your own. A place molded to your tastes.”

Will thought about his small house in Wolf Trap. It was compact but cozy, with his dogs and his hobbies strewn around in an organized chaos. It was a place just for himself. He could appreciate Hannibal’s ideology.

Hannibal stepped into the house, and the inside was even more extravagant. Will handed over his jacket, frowning when it was placed on the nice coat rack next to Hannibal’s suit jacket. It

looked out of place, his old and probably fishy smelling jacket next to Hannibal's flashy clothes.

"Will?"

He looked up, and saw Hannibal follow his gaze to stare at their jackets. They hung next to each other, parallel yet opposites. Hannibal smiled, clearly more pleased than Will was at seeing their lives mixing in such a way.

It was becoming increasingly clear that Hannibal wasn't just his therapist, and Will was unclear what that meant. He was certainly less lonely. These days he could drop by Hannibal's office unannounced and he knew he would be welcome. He'd never had a place or someone welcome him no matter the time or circumstance. It felt comfortable. It felt like home.

He shut down that train of thought quickly, his lips pulling into a grimace that he tried to pass as a smile. "So, what's for lunch?"

Hannibal stared at him a second longer, clearly not buying his false cheer. He seemed to let it go once he noticed Will's discomfort, and led Will to the kitchen. "I recently came across some tender lamb chops. It was from a particularly sprightly lamb, and it would go excellent with some fresh herbs."

Will stood next to the counter, his hands resting on one of the chairs as he watched Hannibal move around the kitchen. He reminded Will of a dancer, fluid and confident in his movements. The kitchen was his stage and he was the prima ballerina.

Will couldn't help the choked laugh that broke out of him, imagining Hannibal in a tutu and prancing across a stage. The image weirdly suited him, and Will smiled when he caught Hannibal's questioning gaze.

"Sorry, it's just…you're really in your element when you're in the kitchen."

"Life starts from food. To consume is to live, and I've always found life to be more vibrant when you have good food in your belly."

Will watched as Hannibal pulled out a slab of meat from the freezer, his hands reaching into cabinets for glass bottles filled with different seasoning. He felt awkward just standing there, and though he knew Hannibal enjoyed cooking and didn't seem to mind doing so for him, he still wanted to help in some way. He cleared his throat, and when Hannibal looked at him, he gestured to the spread of items on the counter. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Hannibal nodded, eyes soft and appreciative as he pointed Will towards a hallway just behind them. "I have everything I need except for rosemary and thyme. I'm sure you saw the wall of herbs when you came in, but the ones I require are in the backyard. I had to move them there so they could get better sunlight."

Will nodded. "How much do you need?"

Hannibal tilted his head, staring down at the lamb chop with a critical eye before pursing his lips with a considering sound. “I estimate about a handful of each would be adequate. Do you know how to identify them?”

“Yeah, I’ve used them to season fish before.” Will didn’t mention that he only used them when he was feeling particularly fancy. He had a feeling Hannibal cooked like this everyday and it was already mind blowing to Will how much effort he put into one meal.

“That’s good,” Hannibal smiled, fingers trailing over the knife block before pulling out a sharp and clearly well-loved one with a distinctive pattern on the metal. Knowing Hannibal, it was likely one of a kind and commissioned overseas. “Make sure you don’t get lost Will, and if you do, just call for me.”

Will wanted to make a comment on Hannibal’s unnecessarily large house, but held his tongue when he realized it probably wasn’t the best idea to insult someone who he was starting to think of as a friend. Will’s steps faltered for a moment before continuing their journey, past two rooms and down the hall. There were pretentious paintings lining the walls, and small wooden tables pressed against the sides with various decorations placed on top. He noticed statues, carvings, and vases of flowers. There were also an alarming number of skulls, but Will didn’t look too closely at them. He’d seen enough corpses with his work as a consultant.

He took it all in, and he considered the vast difference between his cozy cabin and the rich space that Hannibal inhabited. It was interesting how subtly Hannibal had insinuated himself into Will’s life. Will wasn’t sure what to think about it yet, he was just happy he wasn’t alone.

He tugged open the heavy wooden door, and inhaled deeply, relishing the crisp air and the fresh smell of grass. Hannibal’s garden was surprisingly subdued. It was a large area, though the center of it was mostly empty and the bushes and vegetation lined the tall white picket fence erected around the garden. Will had expected large rose bushes, perhaps various vegetables laid out in careful rows (though he had some difficulty imagining Hannibal getting his hands dirty and tending to plants). Instead, there were a few bushes here and there with wilted buds, as if they had struggled to bloom and hadn’t succeeded.

Outside, the wind was a bit more chilly, and the sound of birds chirping gave a sense of peace to the garden. He shielded his eyes and looked up, squinting at the low clouds and the bright sunlight that poked through. After basking in the feeling of nature for a long moment, he looked around the garden.

He noticed a low row of plants carefully shadowed in between some small trees, and stooped down to look at them. His hand delicately traced the small leaves and the almost white strawberries the size of a dime. They were supposed to be ripe and red, flourishing in the spring weather, but here they were, pale and barely clinging on to life. It echoed with a part of him inside, looking at these strawberries and their struggle to mature and become something *more*. He carefully plucked a caterpillar that had been nibbling one of them, and set it as far as he could, away from the strawberries.

He sighed, shaking off the distractions of his mind as he dusted off his knees and stood up, glancing around until he found what he was looking for. He stepped past the rather pitiful bushes and went towards the end of the garden where small pots sat on a marble table. Will

raised a brow at the thing, the design delicate and likely cost more than most of his possessions. And here Hannibal was, using it as a stand for his herbs. Will passed his fingers gently over a few of the smaller pots before taking hold of the rosemary and thyme leaves. He carefully plucked them, making sure he took a few from each pot so as to not strip one plant completely of its leaves.

Once that was done, he clasped his hands gently around each handful of herbs and headed back inside, shouldering the door open and letting it fall shut behind him. He made his way to the kitchen, a small smile on his lips as he leaned against the entryway and observed Hannibal in his natural environment.

Hannibal was kneading something, his white button up rolled up to his elbows, and the knot of his apron hanging low on his hips. Every movement sent a wave of flexing muscles, noticeable even through his shirt.

“Did you find what we needed?”

Will started, a little bit perturbed that he’d been caught staring. He cleared his throat before stepping closer to the counter in between them. He placed the handful of herbs on the countertop, carefully brushing a few clingy ones off the palm of his hands. When he looked back up, Hannibal had turned around with an appraising look. He glanced over the herbs and with a satisfied nod, picked them up with a soft murmur of thanks.

Hannibal turned back to his work, and Will noticed that he had been kneading the lamb chops. He stepped around the counter until he could lean next to Hannibal, careful to give him space to work.

“I noticed your garden was a bit barren,” Will commented, his eyes following the practiced motions as Hannibal washed the herbs in the sink before patting them into the meat.

Hannibal’s lips quirked up in a self-deprecating smile and Will watched with some fascination as he flashed him a rather bashful look. “I must admit, I was hoping you wouldn’t notice. Cooking comes easily to me, but tending to a garden requires more than just learned skills. I’m afraid I don’t have a natural affinity for it.”

Will hummed, a small flutter of something warm in his chest at discovering something Hannibal wasn’t good at. Hannibal seemed almost inhumanely perfect some days, and this was proof that he was just as human as the rest of them. It made Hannibal seem more grounded in his eyes, more approachable. “Have you tried using fertilizer?”

Hannibal sighed, picking up the seasoned meat and carefully placing it on a metal tray he lined with foil. He pushed the meat into the oven, already preheated, and straightened back up with a huff. “I’ve tried, but the plants haven’t taken to it.”

Will tilted his head, and out of the corner of his eye he noticed a few stray herbs stuck to the counter. They seemed to move with purpose, trembling in excitement before bursting up into great towering mushrooms. They spread across the countertop, engulfing the marble. Dirt leaked out of their roots, and they shook for a moment more before stilling.

Will turned away from the sight, and he didn't flinch when a pale hand shot out of the dirt, a thin needle attached to it and the IV stretching to the ceiling. It clawed at the dirt, struggling, suffocating.

"Maybe you just need the right type of fertilizer," Will murmured, voice distant and almost detached. It didn't sound like him, nothing felt real in that moment.

Not until he met Hannibal's eyes, the darkness burning with renewed curiosity and spreading in black ink across Hannibal's face. Will slowly breathed in, and he could smell decomposing bodies and the wet feathers of the Ravenstag. As if sensing his thoughts, Hannibal's eyes darted to the countertop, gaze thoughtful.

"Perhaps you're right."

xxxxxx

"You've been cleared of all charges. You got lucky, Will."

Will sat carefully still in his seat in front of Jack's desk. He tapped his fingers, keeping time with the ticking of the clock.

"It was self defense," Will clenched his jaw, turning his head until he could stare out the window. There was a bird, small and unassuming perched on a branch outside. It fluttered its wings and with a chirp, flew off. Will wished he could do the same. Just leave and fly away, never to come back. "I had to do it. I couldn't risk Abigail."

"I'm not accusing you of anything," Jack reassured in his usual rough way. He gave Will an inscrutable look, and Will wondered if he could see the urges he'd been trying to hide. The justifications he'd given himself as to why he'd chosen to shoot to kill, rather than to apprehend. Maybe it was because he knew that Stammets would rot in the prison system and it was a small mercy. Perhaps it was because he was afraid Stammets would escape and hurt someone else in the future.

Or maybe it was because Will knew it would make him feel powerful.

He shivered and wished, more than anything, that he was in Hannibal's office or sitting across from him at his dining table. Hannibal never made him feel judged for his desires. He seemed to see every dark thought Will had, and instead of crushing them, he wanted them to bloom.

But the edges of morality were blurred in Hannibal's presence. Here, in the real world, Will had to face the very real consequences of his actions.

"This is the second man you've killed to protect Abigail. Should I be concerned?"

Will's eyes snapped to Jack's and he almost snarled at the implications of Jack's words. "I'm not attached to her. It was just a matter of circumstance and coincidence. I would've done the same for anyone."

His words rang true, and he saw Jack relax minutely. There was a long, tense silence before Jack sighed. “Get out of here Will, I’ll call you when we have a case next.”

Will stood, his jacket folded over his arm as he turned to go.

“Will.”

He turned, a grimace already forming on his lips. Jack was a friend, but some days it was hard to remember why. He wasn’t the gentlest man, and most of the time his stubborn pursuit for justice led to collateral damage. He was Jack’s favorite toy at the moment, and soon he wouldn’t be able to ignore the stress it was putting on his mind.

Jack stared up at him, hands clasped under his chin as he pressed his lips together. “Go talk to Hannibal.”

Will nodded. He was going to do that anyways. It had become a habit of sorts, and his weekly visits had quickly evolved into biweekly and now almost daily visits. He would have stopped if he felt Hannibal was being pressured into spending time with him, but Hannibal seemed to enjoy his company thoroughly. To the point that Will wondered what exactly it was that Hannibal saw in him.

Their conversations were often heavy and that would usually scare people off. Hannibal, however, seemed to grow closer to Will the more of his darkness he revealed. Will didn’t like to look too close at all the things he’d confessed to Hannibal, like a sinner at church.

He didn’t like to admit that the intense look Hannibal often gave him made him feel safe.

He left the office, and the clacking hooves of the Ravenstag followed him out.

xxxxxx

Will was in the middle of a lecture when the call came.

He’d had to excuse himself quickly after getting an affirmative from Alana as a substitute for the remainder of his classes. When Jack had told Will to rest until he was needed again, he had hoped for at least a week of reprieve before being dragged into the bloody world of murder and death again.

It hadn’t even been two days since his conversation with Jack at the office, and from the urgency in his voice, Will knew it was going to be a bad one.

He arrived at the crime scene with a shuddering breath. He stepped out of his car, and the air was slightly warmer today. It was sunny and deceptively cheerful. Will shoved his way through the crowd and flashed his badge at the agent that tried to stop him from ducking under the caution tape.

He ducked under it, and within seconds he was flanked by Jack and Beverly.

“It’s the Ripper,” Jack breathed out, a tense sort of excitement to him. “It has to be.”

“This one’s pretty brutal, I’d advise grabbing a doggy bag in case you need to throw up your lunch,” Beverly chirped in, her camera loosely held in her grasp. “Seriously, it’s pretty fucked up.”

“I’ll decide that for myself,” Will replied blandly, his pulse thrumming in anticipation. Though he didn’t share Jack’s obsession with the Ripper, he’d read all the files in preparation for a scene like this. This would be the first time he saw a Ripper scene in the flesh. The Ripper had always been someone he was aware of in the peripheral of his consciousness. He stood out amongst the other serial killers Will had profiled because there was a certain artistic flair to his kills.

It was morbid, and absolutely horrifying, but Will couldn’t help but think that the Ripper had a beautiful mind.

The caution tape had been placed near the end of the winding driveway. It was an affluent area, the mansion surrounded by tall hedges and serving as an effective shield from any nosy neighbors or unsightly strangers. It was too bad those hedges didn’t save them from persistent serial killers.

He reached the end of the driveway and Will breathed out a quiet ‘oh’ as he took in the two bodies. They were both men in their thirties, and a couple, as Jack explained with hushed words. They looked almost peaceful in death, both staring at each other with blank eyes from across the driveway.

Each body had been meticulously broken and woven into a tree, their arms stretched tall above them and fingers ending on the tips of branches green with new leaves. The two trees were across from each other with the driveway in between them. Their arms and the branches that grew out of their flesh had been woven together to create a morbid archway tall enough for cars to pass through. There were roses in the cavity of their bodies, pink ones that were surprisingly spotless without a hint of blood on them. All the organs were missing.

“I’ll leave you to it. Let us know when you get something.” Jack barked out orders and soon enough, the rest of the team had trailed out of the area and around the corner. Will stared up at the blank eyes, taking in the way they seemed to be reaching for each other and closed his own.

The pendulum swung. Once, twice, three times, and then paused.

He opened his eyes and looked around. It was dark and the smell of roses was in the air. It reminded him of love, and it reminded him of blossoming minds. He smiled, teeth white and bright as he carefully cracked bones and peeled back skin. The two men he’d chosen were in peak health, benefits of a rich diet and a healthy exercise regime.

He hefted them up onto the tree, taking pieces of them and attaching them to each until they were almost mirrors of each other. He stepped back and admired them for a few seconds before reaching into his pocket and taking out a knife. He wasn’t careful as he gutted them, not as careful as he usually was.

The meat served a different purpose today.

He'd placed a bucket under them, and emptied all their organs into it with a sick splatter. Once he was done, he closed a lid on the bucket and placed it in his ice chest.

He looked around with interest, taking in the beautiful rose bushes with a twinge of envy. He only allowed himself a brief moment of hesitation before he moved towards them and carefully cut an armful of the blooms. He set them into each body cavity, taking pride in the way they seemed to glow under the moonlight, untainted by the darkness of the blood around each bouquet.

There was still one more thing he wanted to add before he would leave with his prizes. He leaned up and grabbed the branches that he'd woven through their hands, twisting them together. With one final tug to ensure they were properly snared, he stepped back to admire the new arch that decorated the driveway.

They stared blankly, forever reaching for each other, even in death. They were intertwined, woven together and blended in every way.

With one last satisfied look, he picked up the bucket and left.

Will opened his eyes slowly, flashes of rose buds and guts still in his mind. The art before him stood stark in the golden light and Will couldn't help but think it looked prettier in the moonlight. Despite the small part of him that still rebelled against the notion, he still considered it a masterpiece. There was a certain air of curiosity to the art, as if it was an exploration of emotions that the killer rarely felt. It was light, playful.

When Will stared at the bodies reaching for each other, forever conjoined, he felt a pang of longing and envy. Turning away, he wondered if that emotion was his, or if it was an echo of someone else.

"Till death do us part," it was a quiet whisper, and if Will felt an answering caress on his cheek, he kept it to himself.

He pressed his lips tightly together, taking off his glasses with a weary sigh and rubbing at the bridge of his nose. He stood there for a moment longer before walking down the driveway and around the hedges. Jack was standing right outside the wall of hedges, stiff in the cold wind and his gloved hands shoved into his pocket.

"What did you see?"

Will stepped past a few agents. They shot an annoyed look at him as they passed, likely feeling territorial over the crime scene and irked they were kicked out just so an unknown specialist could have access to it unsupervised.

"It was a marriage vow."

"In what way?" Jack probed, as he always did.

"This display wasn't created as an act of love, but rather an attempt to explore it."

"Are you telling me the Ripper is in love?"

Will scoffed, staring down at his scuffed shoes. If only it was that simple. “I didn’t say it was the Ripper.”

“You only ever talk about the Ripper like this.”

“Like what?” Will shot back, feeling defensive though he couldn’t pinpoint why that was. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to say here, Jack. You’re the one obsessed with him.”

“I’m committed to catching him,” Jack corrected, tone gruff with impatience.

“I am too, Jack. That’s why I’m here.”

“You’re here because I asked you to be.”

“Well then,” Will’s lips pulled into a tight smile. “I’m glad we’re both under no delusion as to what’s causing my nightmares.”

“You’re seeing Doctor Lecter for that. He’s supposed to help you.”

“And he is,” Will scrubbed at his face again, wishing for his bed even if he knew he would inevitably wake up sweating from fear. “But there’s only so much he can do.”

Jack was quiet. Long enough that Will glanced at him out of the corner of his eyes. The man looked conflicted, a hint of something soft in his eyes before he hardened again. Always picking the case and the chase over the well-being of his agents. That was who Jack was, and Will didn’t know why he had hoped otherwise.

“I need you on this case, Will. And as long as you are able to help, you will do so.”

It was a demand, and it rankled him but he was resigned to it. “Fine. What do you want to hear?”

“Talk me through this scene. What are the Ripper’s motives? This is the first time I’ve seen him set a scene with two bodies. There must be a reason why.”

Will closed his eyes, a shiver running down his spine as he relived the distinct taste of adoration the piece had. “He’s…stretching his wings.”

“In what way? Is he escalating?”

It was a legitimate worry, and Will didn’t blame Jack for thinking that. After all, if the Ripper decided to kill in pairs for his sounders of three there would be twice the amount of victims.

“No,” Will shook his head. There was something unique about this piece, almost adoring. “This was his way of testing something. He wants to know if he’s capable of…”

Of what? Will was hesitant to say it, but he knew the answer and it was on the tip of his tongue. It tasted warm, like the copper scent of blood and dark chocolate.

Will cleared his throat before looking over Jack's shoulder, a slight grimace on his face. "He wants to know if he's capable of love. And this was his way of expressing that."

Jack let out a harsh bark of laughter, just like Will had anticipated. "The Ripper's a psychopath. Whatever he's looking for in the gutted abdomen's of newlyweds, he's not going to find it."

Will wanted to believe that too, but he wasn't so sure he agreed with Jack. Even the most horrible of human beings were capable of emotions. Will was certainly drowning in them every time he was in a crime scene, analyzing motive after motive, all of them almost always fueled by emotion.

Will shrugged, pointing his thumb behind him in a short gesture. "Well, what I can confirm is that he took the trouble of moving two Sycamore trees into the victim's driveway just so he could reenact a wedding tradition."

"Is it from a specific culture? Maybe it can give us more details on who the Ripper is," Jack was eager, leaning forward and his hands held loosely by his sides instead of in his pockets.

"It's an American tradition and considering the fact that we're on American soil…"

Jack deflated, a short growl of impatience falling from his bared teeth. "That gives us nothing to go on."

"Exactly," Will nodded. "But, the one thing we do know is that these trees are specific to Sunderland, Massachusetts. They are a remanent of the Sunderland forest and they're not easy to find. The tradition dictates that two trees be placed on the entryway to the newlywed's yard and intertwined while they're still young. This way, when the trees grow, they will create an archway symbolizing the merging of the bride and groom's lives. Sycamore trees are known for their longevity, thus their symbolic role in this 17th century tradition."

"How far are we from Sunderland?"

"About six hours give or take," Will tilted his head back, breathing out a frosty puff of white condensation before he started walking away. It was sunny today, but that didn't take away from the chill in the air. "I'm going home. I need to catch up on the coursework I missed when you dragged me away from my lecture."

"We need someone to go to Sunderland," Jack protested, though he didn't follow Will and hound him like he usually would. Will probably looked like utter shit, his bags growing worse and his skin pale. It was rare for Jack to give him a reprieve.

"Then send one of your agents. I'm sure there are many fresh-eyed recruits just dying to gain the favor of Uncle Jack," Will called out over his shoulder with a short wave. He didn't wait for a reply. Today had been a long day, made longer by the crime scene he'd been forced to analyze.

He walked away when a brief prickle of awareness at the base of his skull made him pause.

The Ripper's curiosity felt familiar. It was a steady intensity, one he'd felt before. One he enjoyed.

He shivered, slightly unsettled as he started up his car. In between the notes of Sycamore and fertile dirt, he could almost smell herbs, and the sour tang of unripened strawberries.

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It was several weeks later before Jack called Will in a defeated tone and informed him the lead in Sunderland had reached a dead end. The forest, though diminished over the years, was large and it would be impossible to tell if any of them had been taken or removed from the premises.

Will had expected as much. The Ripper was a professional at his art, it was unlikely he would leave any loose ends or trails for the FBI to follow.

He'd met up with Hannibal a few times over the course of the weeks after the case. It was more than the usual once a week unofficial therapy session they had, and Will was starting to look forward to each meeting. It was pleasant, having someone who seemed to truly enjoy his company and didn't mind his morbid sense of humor.

It probably helped that Hannibal was just as bad if not worse with his jokes. It had been a surprise to Will, learning that Hannibal had quite the sense of humor. Though even that was buried underneath layers of propriety and the annoyingly polite demeanor Hannibal wore. Still, it gave Will a sense of accomplishment whenever he managed to make the doctor chuckle.

Hannibal had a nice smile, a grin that bared slightly sharp teeth and emphasized the laugh lines around his eyes.

Shaking his head, he forced down the blush that threatened to make an appearance and focused on gathering up his papers. He had attempted to grade some of the essays in his lecture room, but clearly his mind was elsewhere. He glanced at his watch, trying not to seem too eager.

Hannibal had invited him over again. Will wasn't sure when it became a habit, but they'd been dining together at least once every two days. Will wasn't complaining, after all if he was left to his own devices it would just be microwave macaroni and cheese. Alana had commented once that Will fed his dogs better than he fed himself and she was absolutely right.

A small smile lit up his face when he saw that he had wasted enough time and he could make his way to Hannibal's house without it being too early. They were having a late lunch today, in an attempt to accommodate each other's schedules. Hannibal had an early patient the next morning and Will still had his normal lectures. They'd both found out the hard way that if they had dinner together, they often lost track of time just talking or sharing stories. It was safer to have a late lunch, that way even if their conversations lasted longer than expected there was still time for them to rest.

It took less than a half hour to get to Hannibal's house and park himself in the driveway. He sat inside his car, his engine idling as he glanced down at his watch. He was still almost an hour early. With a short sigh and a grimace, he got out of his car and made his way to the door. Before he could knock, it was pulled open. Hannibal stood there, a soft smile on his face and an apron around his waist. The sleeves of his button up shirt were rolled up to his elbows, but his hands were clean and wet.

"I'm sorry, did I interrupt you? I know I'm early," Will stepped inside sheepishly, giving Hannibal his jacket in what was now a practiced move as the doctor ushered him into the warmth of the kitchen.

"Of course not, Will. You're always welcome here, and you arrived just in time," Will sat in what he had dubbed his chair as he watched Hannibal move around and settle plates carefully on his arms.

He tilted his head curiously and followed closely when Hannibal walked out of the kitchen. Instead of going to the dining room or the study which had become their custom, Hannibal led him down the hall and out the back door. Will glanced around with interest, taking in the now flowering rose bushes and the vegetation that seemed to have sprouted up overnight. The air was abuzz with bees and butterflies, and Will shook his head fondly at the fancy table Hannibal had managed to move into the center of the garden.

It was already decorated, the centerpiece a skull with roses blooming out of its eye sockets. There were two sets of everything on the table, and Will settled himself into one of the seats. Hannibal placed the food in front of Will, announcing the dish as usual. It was a salad, which was an interesting change from their usual. Hannibal quite liked his meats, as Will had learned. He'd been fed so well recently that he had actually gained weight and muscle mass.

It was something that Hannibal had noticed as well, though he had been distinctly smug when he pointed it out. Will couldn't complain. After all, Hannibal liked taking care of his friends and Will was finally accepting the thought of Hannibal as one of his closest friends. Hannibal's concern was touching, and the hallucinations he'd had made it hard to keep an appetite. It never had any trouble when it came to Hannibal's food though, and Will was grateful for that.

"We're eating outside today?" Will raised a brow, a smile on his face as he pulled out the hand cloth underneath the utensils and spread it on his lap.

"It's a beautiful spring day. It seemed remiss to not take advantage of it. A change of pace is good for the soul," Hannibal's answering smile was more subdued, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

Will hummed before picking up the fork and mirroring Hannibal as they speared some of the salad onto the tines. "I see you're going full nature, even with the food."

Hannibal lit up a little proudly at that, though it was slightly bashful as he looked down at his plate. "I took your advice."

“I don’t remember requesting vegetarian food. I think I would remember if I made such a faux pas,” Will joked as his mind went back to past conversations.

Hannibal shook his head, a tad fond as he pursed his lips. “No, you certainly wouldn’t be here if you were a vegetarian. It was actually your words in the beginning, when you first had dinner with me. It was enlightening, and since then I’ve used a new type of fertilizer on the garden. As you can see, the garden is now flourishing.”

Hannibal gestured to the space around them and Will chuckled. It figures Hannibal wanted to have lunch outside because he wanted to show Will his hard work. Hannibal was nothing if not pragmatic in showing off his accomplishments.

“It looks amazing,” Will complimented, quite sincerely.

“I used some of the plants in our meal today,” Hannibal admitted, a sparkle in his eyes. “Fresh ingredients are hard to come by, and I thought you might appreciate the fruit of our labors.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Will protested slightly with a small shrug. “You put in the hard work.”

“But it was your suggestion that cultivated these plants. I hope it is to your tastes.”

Will sighed, a helpless smile on his lips. He knew that Hannibal could be stubborn when he wanted to be, and he would just have to take the credit for these beautiful plants even if he felt like he hadn’t done anything.

“Thank you. I’m sure I will enjoy it, Hannibal.”

They ate in a comfortable silence, broken only by some light conversation and the hum of nature around them. The sun was close to setting, and it cast the garden in a pink-orange glow. Will took a moment to feel slightly out of place as it dawned on him how distinctly… romantic this whole lunch was.

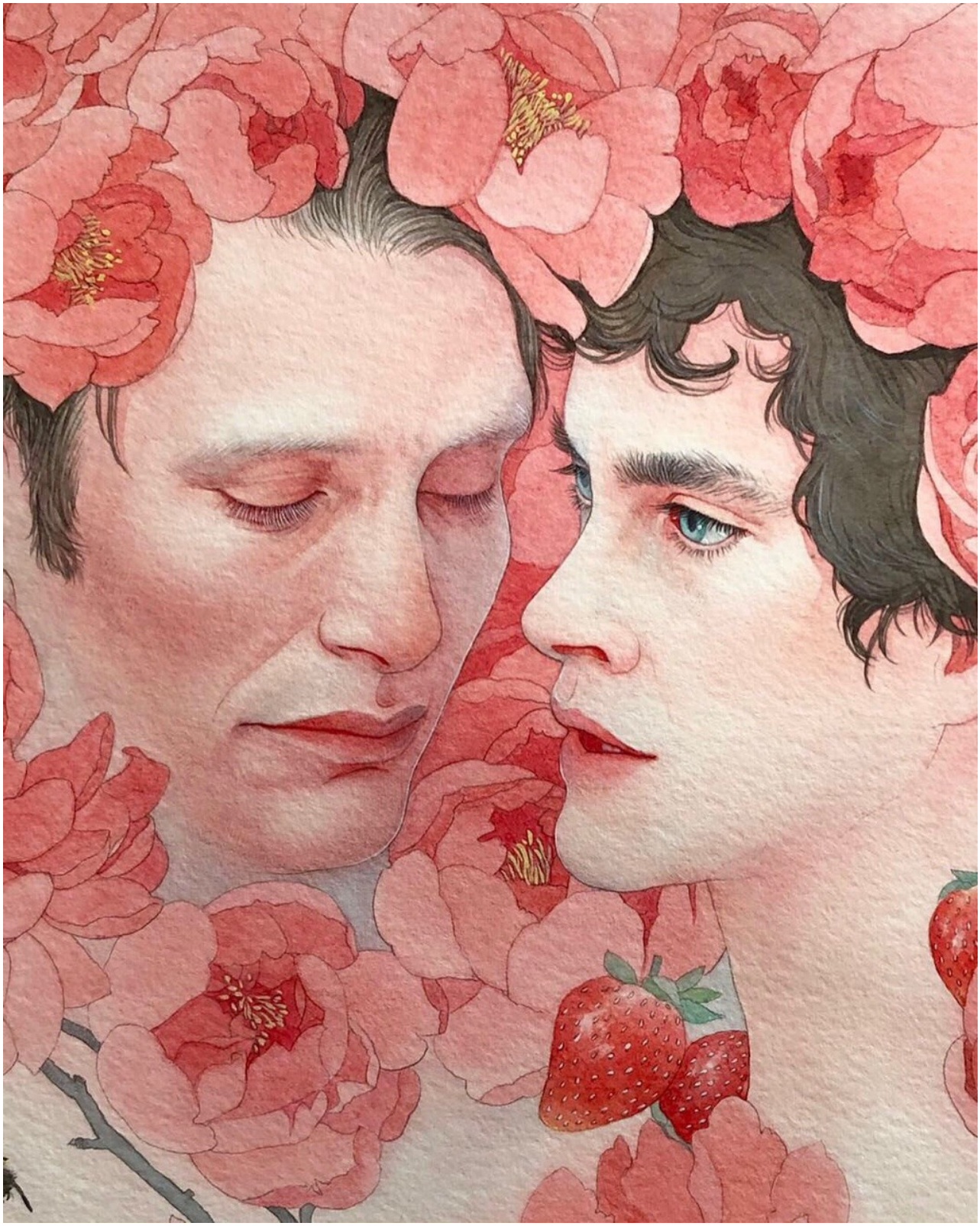
“Is something wrong?”

Hannibal’s voice broke him out of his daze and he flushed, his eyes darting down to the now empty plate. He cleared his throat and grabbed the wineglass, taking a healthy gulp to try and distract himself from his wandering thoughts.

“It’s nothing, I was just admiring the garden.”

Hannibal stood and carefully placed his hand cloth onto the table before gesturing for Will to do the same. Will followed the short distance to the strawberry patch as Hannibal moved silently through the warm grass.

“I hope you like strawberries Will, but this was my most anticipated harvest and I wanted to indulge in it with you by my side.”



Will took in the now flourishing strawberry patch. The leaves were a healthy green hue, fuzzy and clean. The strawberries were mouthwateringly plump, and a far cry from the wilted white berries they'd been weeks ago. He took in the small fence Hannibal had erected around the patch, likely to keep out the smaller animals that passed through the garden.

"They look really good," Will breathed out, pretty amazed by the healthy patch.

Hannibal smiled at the compliment and stooped down to pluck two of the larger red strawberries. He handed one to Will after gently buffing them with his fingers to erase any lingering dirt.

“Try them.”

Will held the strawberry carefully in his grasp, the stem caught in between his fingers. He raised it up into the light, marveling at the redness of the berry and the fresh scent it brought with it. His eyelids fluttered when he bit into it, the sweet juices threatening to spill down his chin. He quickly licked the trail up his hand, aware that Hannibal was watching his every move with interest.

“How is it?” Hannibal asked as he took a bite of his own strawberry. His eyes closed, and now it was Will’s turn to see the euphoria on his face. “Oh, it’s delightful,” Hannibal murmured, answering his own question.

The scent of strawberries was thick on his tongue and it mingled with the heady smell of blooming roses. Will closed his eyes to taste the sweetness in the air. His mouth watered, and when he opened them, he was met with the sight of a beautiful blossom.

He took the flower from Hannibal without a word, unsure what to say as he raised it to his nose and inhaled. It was intoxicating, and he felt dizzy with everything he was feeling, his senses overloaded.

“Thank you, it’s beautiful,” Will spoke lightly, his voice a soft whisper. He didn’t want to break the peace they’d fallen into.

Hannibal nodded, a soft look in his eyes as he led them back to the table and started gathering the plates.

“If you’re amicable, I can gather a bouquet for you to take home. It would please me greatly if you took some of the strawberries as well.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t…” Will protested, a bit flustered as he tried to help Hannibal and was shooed away with a mock glare. Hannibal always insisted on both cooking and cleaning for his guests, and no matter how much Will tried to help, he was always stopped by Hannibal’s disappointed pout.

“It is no trouble to me, Will. Please, there’s too much for me to consume on my own.”

With a sigh, Will relented, though he did give Hannibal a sharp look. “Next time, I’ll provide the food.”

Hannibal paused from where he had started moving towards the door, leading them back into the warm house. Hannibal turned around, his eyes dark with something Will couldn’t name as he flashed Will a fanged grin.

“I look forward to it.”

When Hannibal turned back around and stepped inside, Will lagged behind, a frown growing on his face that he was barely aware of. There was a furrow to his brow, and as he took one last glance towards the garden, he froze.

The two Sycamore trees framed the strawberry patch in an arch, towering over the berries and casting them in shadow. The bodies were embedded and twisted into the trees, but their abdomen were intact. He watched with growing horror as their stomachs bulged and twisted before a thin red line appeared. Then, suddenly they split open, their organs spilling over the strawberries that Will just noticed were a pale white. As the dark blood coated them, they became even more decadent looking, ripe and fresh for the picking.

It was a marriage of bodies, their organs now indiscernible from each other.

The Ravenstag appeared next to him, and his hand twitched by his side, an urge to stop the creature rising up in him. In the end, he lost his chance because the Ravenstag was soon out of his reach, lumbering over to the strawberry patch with large huffs of breath. It leaned its head down, and ate from the bloodied berries with relish. There was the sick squish of organs being crushed by teeth, and the subtle crunch of the strawberries.

“Will?”

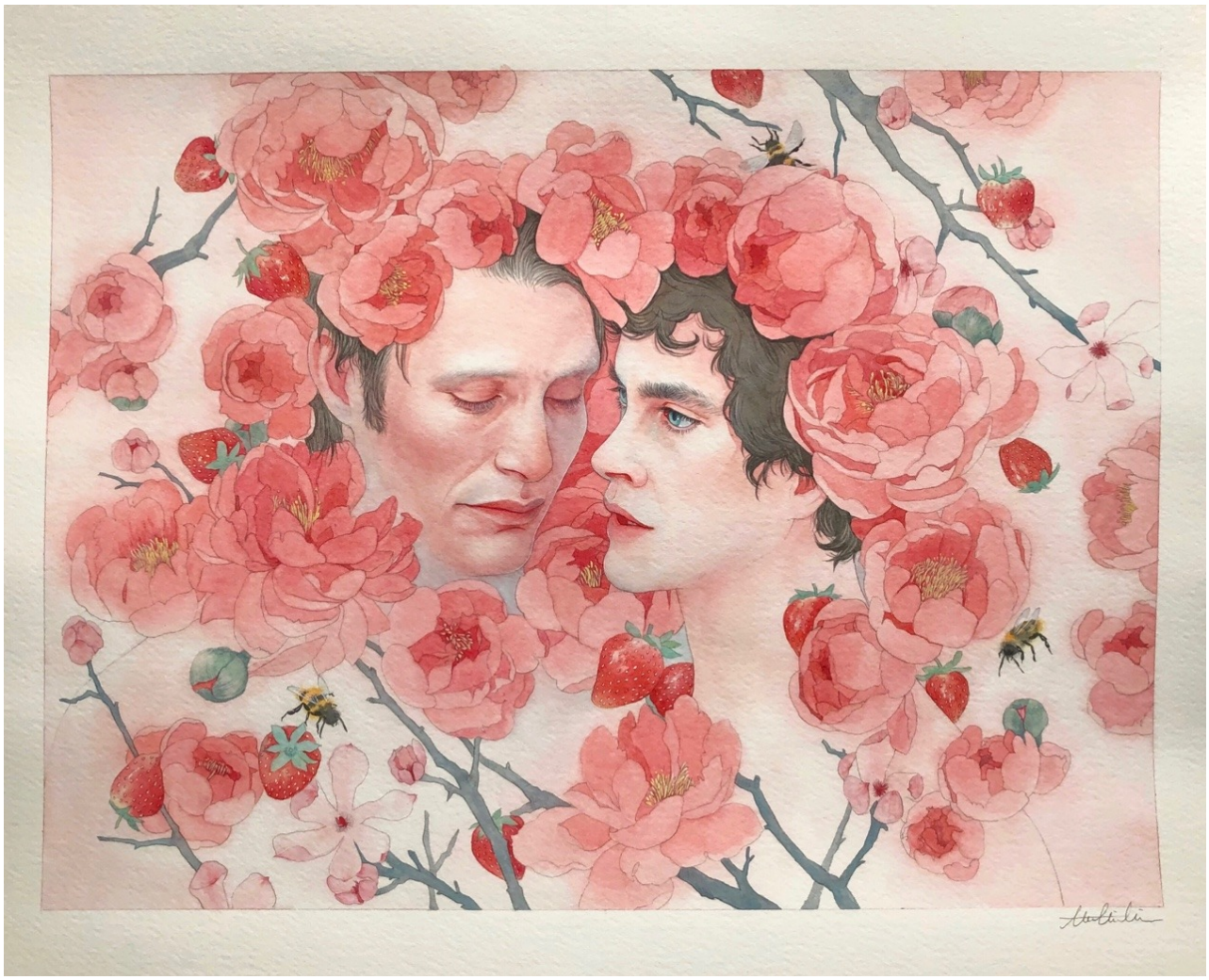
Will let out a shuddering breath, his body shaking and sweat coating his hair, matting his curls down against his skin. He felt Hannibal place a cautious hand on his shoulder, and he blinked a few times before the image before him dissipated. There was nothing there, just a garden glowing in the warmth of the sun.

“Sorry, it was nothing. Let’s go inside,” He couldn’t help reaching up to squeeze Hannibal’s hand for a quick moment, yearning for comfort after the horrible hallucination.

“You’re shaking. Come inside, I’ll make us tea.”

Will nodded, throat dry with fear and mind filled with uncertainties. He stared at the back of the man he’d come to rely on, one he could honestly say was a friend. With one last shaky breath, he stepped inside and closed the door behind him, immersing himself in Hannibal’s space and taking comfort from his presence.

Outside, the cycle of life continued, and the faint tang of rot was masked by the heavy scent of rose blossoms and the sweeter taste of berries.



End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, please let me know what you think with a comment :) My goal for this fic was literally for you to TASTE spring in the air lmao. This is my first (posted) full length fic for the Hannigram fandom and I'm very excited to interact with some fellow fans as I am still a fledgling Hannigram writer! I was very surprised by how interactive the Hannigram fandom was when I posted a small hannigram ficlet a while back. It was very refreshing to see and very humbling. I hope this fic was also something you guys enjoyed <3 You can find the tumblr post for this fic here feel free to reblog!

This work was inspired by Lin's amazing art which you can find on twitter or on tumblr. Please go give them some likes and reblogs they worked hard on the art! I would also like to take the time to thank Lin for being supportive during my writing process and encouraging me <3

As always, many thanks to Dragon, my amazing friend who listens to me ramble about my fics and cheers me on as I struggle to write xD

Stay tuned for the next parts of this series which will come sometime in these next few months. I also have 2 completed long Hannigram fics that I shall be posting in due time and they are also in collaboration with an artist (specifically Dragon who is the most supportive fandom friend <3).

You can find my tumblr here. Feel free to drop by and say hi!

P.S. In true Hannibal pun fashion the name of this series is called "Seasoned to Perfection". GET IT??? BECAUSE IT'S BASED ON THE 4 SEASONS AND IT'S A FOOD PUN x'D

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!